

MASS GREEN NETWORK

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www.MassGreen.Org

CONTACT: Brad Verter
(413) 281-0522
brad@massgreen.org

Five Myths about Plastic Bags

Industry spokespeople have responded to Boston's proposed bag ordinance, which includes a fee for paper and reusable bags, with a flood of misinformation. Let's review some of the facts.

Myth #1: Plastic bags are not a significant problem.

Although plastic bags indeed comprise a small percent of the waste stream compared to, say, construction debris, they pack an enormous wallop. According to the EPA, only 6.6 percent of high-density polyethylene (HDPE) bags are actually recycled, and no facility in the Bay State accepts them. Casella Waste Systems, one of the largest landfill operators in the Northeast, discards over 100 million tons of plastic bags a month.

Produced from unsustainable materials and seldom recycled, plastic bags constitute a major source of pollution and a deadly hazard to terrestrial and marine wildlife. Bags do not degrade but break down into microplastics that are destined to remain in the environment indefinitely, displacing plankton, the most basic element in the food chain and the source of 50% of the world's oxygen. They clog our sewers, blight our streets, and litter our parks.

Plastic bags also contribute to global warming. According to calculations developed by the Progressive Bag Alliance, an industry group, Bostonians discard 343 million bags annually, which add 9,147 metric tons of CO₂ to our atmosphere each year.

Myth #2: Reusable bags are worse for the environment and human health.

Reusable bags do require more resources to manufacture and distribute. But they need to be used only a between 5 and 14 times before these higher costs are offset. Cotton bags need to be reused much more, but generally they are – who throws those out?

Industry advocates love to point to Austin, Texas. Bag waste did go up after the city passed a bag ordinance. But that was because the law failed to include a minimum charge for bags. Since they

were getting quality bags for free, shoppers did not bother to save them, and threw them out. That's one of the reasons why Boston's proposed bag fee is so important. As study after study has shown even a small charge does a lot to change people's habits.

As for that widely reported account that linked a 2012 outbreak of norovirus to a reusable bag? That has been thoroughly debunked. The bag in question was left sitting in a bathroom for six hours where an infected child spent 6 hours having diarrhea and throwing up. Sharing cookies from the bag after she emerged was a bad decision. If a reusable bag gets dirty, you wash it and that kills the germs.

Myth #3: Charging for bags we get for free hurts the poor.

First of all, you don't get something for nothing. Disposable bags cost between 2 and 5 cents each in bulk. The average grocery store spends between \$1000 and \$2000 a week on disposable bags. All told, Boston retailers spend about \$13.7 million each year for bags that their customers throw out as soon as they get home. That is why industry lobbyists are fighting so hard. Stores pass the cost of "free" bags on to consumers in the form of higher prices.

Secondly, bag fees do not raise the cost of living significantly. Los Angeles conducted a study the year after it initiated a 10-cent charge for paper bags and found the economic impact to be less than \$4.00 per resident per year. The suggestion that only the affluent care about plastic waste is contradicted by the 42 diverse Massachusetts cities and towns that have passed bag laws and regulations. China has eliminated bags completely, and so have struggling countries such as Bangladesh and Ethiopia.

Myth #4: Mandating a fee for bags will hurt local businesses.

It's not hard to understand why store owners facing competition from online retailers would worry about a measure that might drive customers away. But there is zero evidence that businesses are affected by bag laws, with or without fees. Post-implementation assessments conducted in such cities as Washington, DC, Los Angeles, and Cambridge, Mass, as well as such countries such as Ireland and England have found that businesses remain strong, and customers adapt very quickly indeed.

A fee for paper bags actually helps businesses thrive, allowing them to recover costs without having to raise prices. When Chicago first considered a bag ordinance, the Illinois Retailer Merchants Association lobbied the city to impose a 5 or 10 cent fee. When the Mayor refused, businesses protested. (He later capitulated, and Chicago passed a law mandating a 7 cent fee.)

When Rwanda banned plastic bags in 2008, its economy was still recovering from a genocidal civil war. Today its GDP growth rate is 8% per year, and Kigali is one of the greenest, cleanest cities on earth.

Myth #5: Plastic bag bans are not effective.

In fact, as industry lobbyists know, bag bans are enormously effective, reaping significant and tangible benefits within months. Even without a fee, bag waste plummets immediately once laws in place. England reported an 85% reduction in bag use countrywide six months after the introduction of a 5p charge. Morocco reported a 90% decline in Rabat one month after it passed its law. Closer to home, Cambridge reported reductions in single-use bags of up to 80% shortly after the imposition of 10 cent fee for paper bags. And as a 2013 study by the non-partisan Equinox Center notes, reducing bag waste means saving energy and water, and reducing greenhouse gases.

Although we commonly speak of ordinances to reduce plastic waste as “bans,” the term is misleading. Measures such as these represent not prohibitions of individual conduct but rather affirmations of community standards. By passing a bag law, the people of Boston will be electing to live more deliberately and more sustainably.

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Bradford Verter is the founder and director of the Mass Green Network. A collective that includes representatives from the Sierra Club, the US Humane Society, Toxics Action Center, Clean Water Action, MASSPIRG, the Surfrider Foundation, Women Working for Oceans, the Environmental League of Massachusetts, Sociedad Latina, CERO, and over 300 other groups and individuals throughout the Commonwealth.

The studies from which these facts are derived are at <http://www.massgreenn.org/plastic-bag-impact.html>